

Visions for Practice-Responsive Research: A Conversation with Mesmin Destin, Simone Ispa-Landa, and Amy Pratt

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At our annual convening, scholar members of Student Experience Research Network come together to share their work, give and receive feedback, and discuss themes related to scholarship on learning and students' experience of feeling respected as valued people and thinkers in school. This year, the convening theme was *Visions for Practice-Responsive Research*.

This theme reflects a broader, ongoing conversation in academia and the education sector about how to bridge between research and practice and how to partner with communities and students to better understand which research questions are most relevant from their perspectives.

The convening began with a panel of three colleagues from Northwestern University. SERN scholars [Mesmin Destin](#), a social psychologist, and [Simone Ispa-Landa](#), a sociologist, were joined by moderator Amy Pratt, the assistant dean for community-education partnerships in Northwestern's School of Education and Social Policy, to discuss how the research process – from developing questions, to designing a research-practice partnership or other types of studies, to the analysis and interpretation of findings – can be set up to yield actionable insights for stakeholders in education practice and policy.

Northwestern University has a robust infrastructure to support community education partnerships. The [office that Amy co-leads](#) manages the day-to-day operations and ongoing cultivation of research-practice partnerships (RPPs) with school districts in Chicago and Evanston, IL. "It's a little bit different than some RPPs," Amy explained, "because we don't focus on a particular line of inquiry or a set of research questions. We're really focused in on the district research agendas and matching those questions and those issues that are prioritized by them with our scholars who are interested in working with them."

"It needs to be mutually beneficial," Simone agreed. "There has to be a really continuous motive for me to keep working on [a project] that's intellectual. And I think for their side, they need to feel like they're really going to get something out of whatever answers I can provide [because], just like with any research, it can get hard and challenging."

Common tensions in practice-responsive research

The group named some of the challenges of bridging research and practice, including mismatched timelines between researchers and practitioners, complex school- and district-level politics and confidentiality concerns, and transitions in district and university leadership.

Simone pointed out that district leadership transitions can also be an opportunity, in that new staff are often eager to learn about and be involved in ongoing projects. Mesmin recommended building relationships with district staff beyond the project lead. If that key person leaves, he said, “they’ll know your name and have a sense of what you were doing and you can regain momentum.”

One role of Amy’s office is to maintain institutional knowledge that supports practice-responsive research, even through district staff transitions, with what she called “established ways of working that are documented, that are reported on regularly, that are really part of the fabric of [Northwestern University].”

This is one way in which institutional support for practice-responsive research can help researchers navigate common challenges. “Oftentimes as faculty, even as junior faculty, we don’t recognize how much power we might have to advocate for things at the university level. I would definitely encourage people to advocate for the type of structures . . . that we’ve been able to build over the years at Northwestern,” Mesmin said. “The universities are going to be called upon more and more to be able to demonstrate the value of the work that they’re doing and the connection it has to real issues. And this is a way to make that very clear and to support that type of work. So I think advocating for those types of supports or at least talking about it to people who might have the power can go a longer way than you might expect.”

Creating a feedback loop between research and practice

When starting a project, Mesmin advised “thinking about it holistically” to determine “what are all the pieces that are getting at your question and what’s the place that makes the most sense to bring in a partner that might be investing something and how can you do it in a way that immediately, or at least shortly thereafter, gives them something back.”

Simone, for example, tries to “provide low hanging fruit to people who have the power to change things,” by sharing insights from her research that could help improve institutional practices, policies, and norms. “I try to give interim briefings,” she said, “and let them know ‘this is preliminary, but I want to let you know where I am,’ to feed that desire for findings. . . . A lot of times in those meetings about ongoing or preliminary findings, I get ideas and we talk about next steps together in a really collaborative way.”

In one of Mesmin’s projects at a middle school about “identity and how you think about the future and how kids are developing images relevant to their own group,” his team created visual materials for students related to different ideas about where they saw themselves in the future. The students loved the materials and designated staff at the school have continued to use them. “Obviously it’s great to see huge system level change,” Mesmin said, “but I like to see things at our partner level schools or in the community that are quickly taken up in [a] real effective way like that.”

Of course, he said, “it’s more than just [making] the recommendation and then everything will be perfect.” But, he went on: “It goes such a long way to even just come back and say, ‘here’s what I found; here’s why it’s interesting; here’s what I think it means.’ And then to keep building from there. It’s been shocking how many different partners have said they’ve never had [a researcher] even come back and say what they found.”

Forward-looking strategies to support practice-responsive research

Finally, the panelists explained the foundational policies, practices, and norms that can enable practice-responsive research. Simone described using an “apprenticeship model” to equip graduate students to lead meetings and other communications with district partners. Mesmin takes a similar approach. “I enjoy just being creative and being scrappy and talking to people,” he said. “I like maintaining some of that for graduate students, just give a little bit of an entree and then encourage them to get creative and build relationships.”

Not all practice-responsive research involves working directly with a school or district partner, and researchers can begin to engage with this type of work through something like tracking education practice and policy news outlets, for example. The panelists also shared that building relationships with practice partners led to other opportunities for direct, informal communication with them and other practitioners in their networks. Their perspectives can, in turn, shape the questions that researchers ask.

Structures that can support research-practice partnerships and other practice-responsive scholarship are also essential. For universities newer to the work, Mesmin recommended: “Hire somebody – a designated person – if you can’t start a whole office.” Simone agreed. “It’s been really helpful to have someone who really knows the ins and outs of a particular district,” she said, “and how they prefer to work with researchers because that can vary hugely too.”

[Watch the clip](#) to hear more from the panelists about what practice-responsive research looks like to them.